



I hear the crack of his skull before the spattering of blood reaches me.

I gasp and take a quick step back onto the sidewalk. One of my heels doesn't clear the curb, so I grip the pole of a *No Parking* sign to steady myself.

The man was in front of me a matter of seconds ago. We were standing in a crowd of people waiting for the crosswalk light to illuminate when he stepped into the street prematurely, resulting in a run-in with a truck. I lunged forward in an attempt to stop him—grasping at nothing as he went down. I closed my eyes before his head went under the tire, but I heard it pop like the cork of a champagne bottle.

He was in the wrong, looking casually down at his phone, probably a side effect of crossing the same street without incident many times before. *Death by routine.*

People gasp, but no one screams. The passenger of the offending vehicle jumps out of the truck and is immediately on his knees near the man's body. I back away from the scene as several people rush forward to help. I don't have

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to look at the man under the tire to know he didn't survive that. I only have to look down at my once-white shirt—at the blood now splattered across it—to know that a hearse would serve him better than an ambulance.

I spin around to move away from the accident—to find a place to take a breath—but the crosswalk sign now says *walk* and the thick crowd takes heed, making it impossible for me to swim upstream in this Manhattan river. Some don't even look up from their cell phones as they pass right by the accident. I stop trying to move, and wait for the crowd to thin. I glance back toward the accident, careful not to look directly at the man. The driver of the truck is now at the rear of the vehicle, wide-eyed, on a cell phone. Three, maybe four, people are assisting them. A few are led by their morbid curiosities, filming the gruesome scene with their phones.

If I were still living in Virginia, this would play out in a completely different manner. Everyone around would stop. Panic would ensue, people would be screaming, a news crew would be on scene in a matter of minutes. But here in Manhattan, a pedestrian struck by a vehicle happens so often, it's not much more than an inconvenience. A delay in traffic for some, *a ruined wardrobe for others*. This probably happens so often, it won't even end up in print.

As much as the indifference in some of the people here disturbs me, it's exactly why I moved to this city ten years ago. People like me belong in overpopulated cities. The state of my life is irrelevant in a place this size. There are far more people here with stories much more pitiful than mine.

Here, I'm invisible. Unimportant. Manhattan is too crowded to give a shit about me, and I love her for it.

"Are you hurt?"

I look up at a man as he touches my arm and scans my shirt. Deep concern is embedded in his expression as he looks me up and down, assessing me for injuries. I can tell by his reaction that he isn't one of the more hardened New Yorkers. He might live here now, but wherever he's from, it's a place that didn't completely beat the empathy out of him.

"Are you hurt?" the stranger repeats, looking me in the eye this time.

"No. It's not my blood. I was standing near him when..." I stop speaking. *I just saw a man die.* I was so close to him, his blood is on me.

I moved to this city to be invisible, but I am certainly not impenetrable. It's something I've been working on—attempting to become as hardened as the concrete beneath my feet. It hasn't been working out so well. I can feel everything I just witnessed settling in my stomach.

I cover my mouth with my hand, but pull it away quickly when I feel something sticky on my lips. *More blood.* I look down at my shirt. So much blood, none of it mine. I pinch at my shirt and pull it away from my chest, but it sticks to my skin in spots where the blood splatters are beginning to dry.

I think I need water. I'm starting to feel light-headed, and I want to rub my forehead, pinch my nose, but I'm scared to touch myself. I look up at the man still gripping my arm.

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“Is it on my face?” I ask him.

He presses his lips together and then darts his eyes away, scanning the street around us. He gestures toward a coffee shop a few doors down.

“They’ll have a bathroom,” he says, pressing his hand against the small of my back as he leads me in that direction.

I look across the street at the Pantem Press building I was headed to before the accident. I was so close. Fifteen—maybe twenty—feet away from a meeting I desperately need to be in.

I wonder how close the man who just died was from *his* destination?

The stranger holds the door open for me when we reach the coffee shop. A woman carrying a coffee in each hand attempts to squeeze past me through the doorway until she sees my shirt. She scurries backward to get away from me, allowing us both to enter the building. I move toward the women’s restroom, but the door is locked. The man pushes open the door to the men’s restroom and motions for me to follow him.

He doesn’t lock the door behind us as he walks to the sink and turns on the water. I look in the mirror, relieved to see it isn’t as bad as I’d feared. There are a few spatters of blood on my cheeks that are beginning to darken and dry, and a spray above my eyebrows. But luckily, the shirt took the brunt of it.

The man hands me wet paper towels, and I wipe at my face while he wets another handful. I can smell the blood now. The tanginess in the air sends my mind whirling back

to when I was ten. The smell of blood was strong enough to remember it all these years later.

I attempt to hold my breath at the onset of more nausea. I don't want to puke. But I want this shirt off me. *Now.*

I unbutton it with trembling fingers, then pull it off and place it under the faucet. I let the water do its job while I take the other wet napkins from the stranger and begin wiping the blood off my chest.

He heads for the door, but instead of giving me privacy while I stand here in my least attractive bra, he locks us inside the bathroom so no one will walk in on me while I'm shirtless. It's disturbingly chivalrous and leaves me feeling uneasy. I'm tense as I watch him through the reflection in the mirror.

Someone knocks.

"Be right out," he says.

I relax a little, comforted by the thought that someone outside this door would hear me scream if I needed to.

I focus on the blood until I'm certain I've washed it all off my neck and chest. I inspect my hair next, turning left to right in the mirror, but find only an inch of dark roots above fading caramel.

"Here," the man says, fingering the last button on his crisp white shirt. "Put this on."

He's already removed his suit jacket, which is now hanging from the doorknob. He frees himself of his button-up shirt, revealing a white undershirt beneath it. He's muscular, taller than me. His shirt will swallow me. I can't wear this into my meeting, but I have no other

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option. I take the shirt when he hands it to me. I grab a few more dry paper towels and pat at my skin, then pull it on and begin buttoning it. It looks ridiculous, but at least it wasn't *my* skull that exploded on someone else's shirt. *Silver lining.*

I take my wet shirt out of the sink and accept there's no saving it. I toss it in the trashcan, and then I grip the sink and stare at my reflection. Two tired, empty eyes stare back at me. The horror of what they've just witnessed have darkened the hazel to a murky brown. I rub my cheeks with the heels of my hands to inspire color, to no avail. I look like death.

I lean against the wall, turning away from the mirror. The man is wadding up his tie. He shoves it in the pocket of his suit and assesses me for a moment. "I can't tell if you're calm or in a state of shock."

I'm not in shock, but I don't know that I'm calm, either. "I'm not sure," I admit. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," he says. "I've seen worse, unfortunately."

I tilt my head as I attempt to dissect the layers of his cryptic reply. He breaks eye contact, and it only makes me stare even harder, wondering what he's seen that tops a man's head being crushed beneath a truck. Maybe he *is* a native New Yorker. Or maybe he works in a hospital. He has an air of competence that often accompanies people who are in charge of other people.

"Are you a doctor?"

He shakes his head. "I'm in real estate. Used to be, anyway." He steps forward and reaches for my shoulder, brushing something away from my shirt. *His* shirt. When

he drops his arm, he regards my face for a moment before taking a step back.

His eyes match the tie he just shoved in his pocket. *Chartreuse*. He's handsome, but there's something about him that makes me think he wishes he weren't. Almost as if his looks might be an inconvenience to him. A part of him he doesn't want anyone to notice. He wants to be invisible in this city. *Just like me*.

Most people come to New York to be discovered. The rest of us come here to hide.

"What's your name?" he asks.

"Lowen."

There's a pause in him after I say my name, but it only lasts a couple seconds.

"Jeremy," he says. He moves to the sink and runs the water again, and begins washing his hands. I continue to stare at him, unable to mute my curiosity. What did he mean when he said he's seen worse than the accident we just witnessed? He said he used to be in real estate, but even the worst day on the job as a realtor wouldn't fill someone with the kind of gloom that's filling this man.

"What happened to you?" I ask.

He looks at me in the mirror. "What do you mean?"

"You said you've seen worse. What have you seen?"

He turns off the water and dries his hands, then faces me. "You actually want to know?"

I nod.

He tosses the paper towel into the trashcan and then shoves his hands in his pockets. His demeanor takes an even more sullen dive. He's looking me in the eye, but

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there's a disconnect between him and this moment. "I pulled my eight-year-old daughter's body out of a lake five months ago."

I suck in a rush of air and bring my hand to the base of my throat. *It wasn't gloom at all in his expression. It was despair.* "I'm so sorry," I whisper. And I am. Sorry about his daughter. Sorry for being curious.

"What about you?" he asks. He leans against the counter like this is a conversation he's ready for. A conversation he's been waiting for. Someone to come along and make his tragedies seem less tragic. It's what you do when you've experienced the worst of the worst. You seek out people like you...people worse off than you... and you use them to make yourself feel better about the terrible things that have happened to you.

I swallow before I speak, because my tragedies are nothing compared to his. I think of the most recent one, embarrassed to speak it out loud because it seems so insignificant compared to his. "My mother died last week."

He doesn't react to my tragedy like I reacted to his. He doesn't react at all, and I wonder if it's because he was hoping mine was worse. It isn't. *He wins.*

"How did she die?"

"Cancer. I've been caring for her in my apartment for the past year." He's the first person I've said that to out loud. I can feel my pulse throbbing in my wrist, so I clasp my other hand around it. "Today is the first time I've stepped outside in weeks."

We stare at each other for a moment longer. I want to say something else, but I've never been involved in such a

heavy conversation with a complete stranger before. I kind of want it to end, because where does the conversation even go from here?

It doesn't. It just stops.

He faces the mirror again and looks at himself, pushing a strand of loose dark hair back in place. "I have a meeting I need to get to. You sure you'll be okay?" He's looking at my reflection in the mirror now.

"Yes. I'm alright."

"*Alright?*" He turns, repeating the word like a question, as if being *alright* isn't as reassuring to him as if I'd said I would be *okay*.

"I'll be alright," I repeat. "Thank you for the help."

I want him to smile, but it doesn't fit the moment. I'm curious what his smile would look like. Instead, he shrugs a little and says, "Alright, then." He moves to unlock the door. He holds it open for me, but I don't exit right away. Instead, I continue to watch him, not quite ready to face the world outside. I appreciate his kindness and want to say more, to thank him in some way, maybe over coffee or by returning his shirt to him. I find myself drawn to his altruism—a rarity these days. But it's the flash of wedding ring on his left hand that propels me forward, out of the bathroom and coffee shop, onto the streets now buzzing with an even larger crowd.

An ambulance has arrived and is blocking traffic in both directions. I walk back toward the scene, wondering if I should give a statement. I wait near a cop who is jotting down other eyewitness accounts. They aren't any different from mine, but I give them my statement and contact

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information. I'm not sure how much help my statement is since I didn't actually see him get hit. I was merely close enough to hear it. Close enough to be painted like a Jackson Pollock canvas.

I look behind me and watch as Jeremy exits the coffee shop with a fresh coffee in his hand. He crosses the street, focused on wherever it is he's going. His mind is somewhere else now, far away from me, probably on his wife and what he'll say to her when he goes home missing a shirt.

I pull my phone out of my purse and look at the time. I still have fifteen minutes before my meeting with Corey and the editor from Pantem Press. My hands are shaking even worse now that the stranger is no longer here to distract me from my thoughts. Coffee may help. Morphine would *definitely* help, but hospice removed it all from my apartment last week when they came to retrieve their equipment after my mother passed. It's a shame I was too shaken to remember to hide it. I could really use some right about now.